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ABSTRACT

For decades research on mass media in political campaigns has yielded little evidence of direct, significant effects. Most survey research on elections found adequate explanations for voting decisions while excluding the impact of mass media. Although the increasing use of expensive television advertising campaigns is evidence of the confidence of candidates and their advisors, researchers have remained unconvinced, although in recent years they have begun to examine political television commercials more closely. The number of surveys has remained small, however, and fraught with methodological difficulties. Recent topics of research include: levels of voter exposure; extent of selective exposure; voter recall of information; selective perception and retention of information; "image" versus "issue" spots; the effect of length; direct impact on voting decisions; and the functions that such spots perform for voters. Recommendations for future research include the following: make further efforts to isolate the impact of particular spots; use more realistic viewing situations; measure the cumulative impact of several different spots over time; study the interaction of spots with other information sources; and study the uses voters make of the information derived from spots. (DF)

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The Impact of Political Television Commercials

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The Impact of Political Television Commercials

Lynda Lee Kaid*

For decades the results of research on mass media in political campaigns did not yield much evidence of direct or significant effects. Most of the thorough, well-conducted survey research on elections found adequate explanations for voting decisions which left little room for significant effects. Most of the thorough, well-conducted survey research on elections found adequate explanations for voting decisions which left little room for significant mass media impact. Although the increasing use of expensive television advertising campaigns evidenced the confidence of political candidates and their professional advisors in the impact of television commercials, scholars remained generally pessimistic.

In the past few years, however, researchers have begun to take a closer look at political television commercials. The number of studies which have been directly concerned with political television commercials is still small, and many of the studies suffer from numerous methodological constraints. Yet some progress is being made, and it is important to assess the present status of this area of research. Thus, the purpose of this report is to summarize and evaluate the results of current research and to offer some suggestions for future investigations.

The Status of Present Research

Levels of Voter Exposure to Political Spots

The average 4-6 hours which the majority of Americans spend in front of their television sets could be expected to result in exposure to most of the tube's offerings, including political advertising. Empirical research has tended to verify this common sense expectation. For instance, a telephone survey conducted during the 1972 presidential campaign by Surlin and Gordon (1974) indicated that 97-98% of the respondents could recall seeing political advertisements on television. Atkin, Bowen, Nayman, and Sheinkopf (1973) studied the 1970 gubernatorial contests in Colorado and Wisconsin and found that viewers remembered seeing more ads as their television exposrue levels increased. In other words, the primary determinant of the viewer noticing ads was the amount of his daily television viewing time. Similar relationships between levels of television use and exposure to ads were noted by Shaw and Bowers (1973) and Bowers (1975). Surlin and Gordon also found high education and high socio-economic status to be related to television ad exposure and greater recall of ads.

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Selective Exposure

Given a certain amount of exposure to television ads, the obvious question is to what extent is exposure selective? One of the oft-cited strategies behind the use of political spots is their capacity to evade voters' predispositions and the tendency to selectively expose themselves to information.

If voters engage in such selective activity, they are reluctant to admit it. In response to rather direct questions asking just that, few people say they consciously attempt to avoid political advertisements of either party, a result reported in both the study of the 1970 gubernatorial contests mentioned earlier (Atkin, et al., 1973) and a study of the 1972 presidential campaign by O'Keefe and Sheinkopf (1974). The determining factor seems to be merely the relative availability of spots for a candidate rather than the operation of selective processes of exposure. However, since the nature of the selective mechanism is probably subconscious, researchers should be cautioned against over-reliance on the answers of voters to such obvious questions.

While finding little admitted selective exposure, Atkin and his colleagues (1973) did find that there was no corresponding relationship between exposure and paying attention to the ads. When asked whether they had given "close" attention, "some" attention, or "little" attention to the ads in the gubernatorial contests studied, only 28% of the sample said they paid "close" attention, 42% "some" attention, and 29% "little" attention. Age, education, occupation, and sex were only slightly related to attention to the ads. Thus, while saturation advertising may result in high exposure, there is no assurance that viewers will pay rapt attention to such ads.

The Effect of Repeated Exposures

One of the underlying assumptions about political spot usage is that repeated exposure to the candidate will result in increased affects toward the candidate. The validity of this assumption has not been well researched. Becker and Doolittle (1973) undertook a study designed to measure the impact of varying frequencies of mere exposure to ads. The researchers subjected 63 students to tapes containing simple 7-second vote messages for fictitious candidates. The results indicated a curvilinear relationship with moderate exposure (5 times) resulting in higher affects toward the candidate than either low (2 times) or high (10 times) exposure. Although the researchers seem to imply a test of or applicability to television advertising, only audio messages were used, and further caution in interpretation is necessary due to the unrealistic nature of the experimental situation.

Another laboratory study by Rothschild and Ray measured effects of repeated message exposure on three variables, recall of commercials, attitude toward the candidate, and vote intention. The researchers found that for congressional candidates recall increased from 20% with one presentation of a brief slide advertisement to 55% with 6 presentations. Overall, they found differences among the variables depending on the level of race and the degree of subject involvement. In low-level races, such as for state assembly, repeated commercials resulted in increased recall, little attitude change, and great effect on vote intentions, while repeated commercials in high-level races, such as for the presidency, resulted in high recall, moderate attitude change,

and little vote effect. Less effect from the commercials was found for high-involvement voters than for low-involvement voters (Rothschild and Ray, 1974). However, while this study is significant because of its finding that spots may have more effect in low-level races, nonrandom sample selection and unrealistic stimulus materials require cautious interpretation of its results.

Voter Recall of Information from Ads

Through political advertising, a candidate attempts to impart to the prospective voter items of information which he believes will induce the voter to feel either positively toward him or negatively toward his opponent. Hence, an important area of research in political advertising has concerned the amount and type of information gain which results from ads.

Information gain is traditionally measured by the content which voters are able to recall. The validity of this measure has received some support as an indication of effectiveness. For instance, the Cunningham and Walsh (TV, 1960) study of Rockefeller's 1958 gubernatorial campaign identified a relationship between the amount of voter recall and a favorable image of the candidate. The greater the impression made by the candidate on television, the more voters recalled about his appearance and the more favorably they tended to regard him.

A closely related question has to do with what types of advertising have the greatest likelihood of increasing voter recall. The telephone survey of voters in the Colorado and Wisconsin gubernatorial elections of 1970 concluded that the entertainment value of advertisements was a major predictor of information gain (Atkin, et al., 1973).

Perhaps related is the finding by Kaid (1975) that subjects recall more content from image commercials than from issue commercials. In a laboratory study which compared issue commercials with image commercials, significantly more items of accurate recall were generated from the image than from the issue commercials.

Without discounting the role of quantitative recall, it may also be important to the candidate's purpose that the voter feels he has gained information of some substance from the ads. Therefore, the question of what type of information voters acquire is the subject of some concern. Research results are by no means consistent. Atkin, et al. (1973) asked viewers to assess the information they had obtained from political advertisements, with the result that 64% felt they had learned something about the candidate's qualifications, 56% thought they had reached a better understanding of candidate-issue positions, and 41% felt they were better acquainted with the candidate as a person as a consequence of viewing the ads.

In contrast, some researchers have concluded that people gain very little information from television ads. O'Keefe and Sheinkopf (1974) tried to determine the impact of ads in the 1972 presedential campaign by asking their telephone sample to name issues in the campaign. Over 60% could not even name 3 issues spontaneously. A large majority (72%) said that they had learned little or nothing about the qualifications of both candidates from television ads. This study, like many others, relies on the recall of the voter as to the source of particular pieces of information, and it may be too much to expect accurate judgments from voters after the fact. This seems particularly imprudent in light of the findings by other researchers which cast doubt on the ability of viewers to separate information sources in their own minds (Bower, 1973; Atwood and Sanders, 1974).

In a much more methodologically sound study, McClure and Patterson (1974) compared information gain from political television advertising with television news and found that voters appear to get more issue information from the ads than from the news. Further support for the ability of advertising to communicate issue information to voters can be found in agenda-setting research. Shaw and Bowers (1973) found a high correlation between the ad agenda (issues stressed in ads as determined by content analysis), and the agenda which voters recalled from the ads -- the correlation was +.962 for Nixon supporters and +.967 for McGovern supporters.

The same data set, however, when analyzed by Bowers (1975) revealed little correlation between the ad agenda and the personal agenda of voters (that is, the issues voters said they were most concerned about). The rank order correlation between the ad agenda and the personal agenda was only -.02 for Nixon and +.21 for McGovern. However, many of the ads had as their issue some aspect of the candidate's personality. When these were excluded from the ad agenda, the correlation increased to +.26 for Nixon and +.53 for McGovern. The agendum of McGovern supporters who saw "many" commercials correlated more closely with the issues stressed in the ads than did the agendum of voters who saw "few" commercials, but this did not hold true for Nixon supporters. In short, voters seem to accurately perceive major issues of candidate advertisements, but voter issue concerns are not limited to issues stressed in the ads.

Selective Perception and Retention of Information from Ads

While research findings have tended to negate the operation of a selective exposure process, at least within the constraints of the methodologies mentioned earlier, the opposite appears to be true when perception and retention of spots are considered. Perhaps the voter cannot avoid hearing and viewing ads for the opposition candidate, but he can and apparently does, consciously or subconsciously, distort his perception and retention of the advertising content.

Surlin and Gordon (1974) reported that subjects did selectively retain information--they were more likely to remember information from ads about their preferred candidate. Donohue found that selective perception is apparently also operative, at least with regard to issue information. His results, from a laboratory study which exposed subjects to simple spots regarding issue positions of 1972 presidential contenders, indicate a high correlation between accurate-inaccurate perception of ad content and the subjects' personal acceptance-rejection of the issue statements. While very high or very low credibility candidates did not result in more misperception of issues than moderately credible candidates, there was an interaction between candidate credibility and salience of issues (i.e., there were more errors for high credibility candidates on highly salient issues than on low-salience issues). Overall, the results indicate that "people frequently distort the contents of television political advertising spots" (Donohue, 1973-74, p. 14).

Type of Spot

The controversy over the relative effectiveness of "image" versus "issue" spots has resulted in a few attempts to compare them. Rose and Fuchs' interesting analysis (1968) of the Reagen-Brown 1966 contest for governor of California characterized Brown's ads as "professional," "subtle," and "deserving of Oscars," whereas Reagan's ads were "straightforward,"

"issue-oriented," and appealing to an electorate searching for clearcut answers. Although the electoral success of Reagan seems to imply some superiority for the latter type of ad, the authors caution that this does not necessarily mean that the simple approach is better than the "artful" approach.

Two researchers have attempted to compare the two types of spots in experimental laboratory settings. Brownstein (1971) used actors to film spots and screened them for undergraduates at Florida State University in an attempt to determine if communication strategies based on homeostatic theory (defined as clear presentation of ideas) or image theory (defined as ambiguous issue presentation but projection of personality attributes) are superior. Although he found no differences in either style on several other variables (such as use of radio, television, or print and group interaction), he did conclude that the style of the presentation of the message (ambiguous vs. nonambiguous) did systematically influence the degree of perceptual accuracy about the candidates' ideology and the degree of favorability with which the candidates were regarded by the subjects. Image was a better predictor than issues, but the latter was also a good predictor--suggesting that the two theories complement rather than contradict one another.

Kaid (1975) conducted an experimental study using actual spots produced by Bob Goodman for a West Virginia gubernatorial campaign and shown to subjects in the context of a 30-minute television program. Subjects were divided into four groups, each of which saw the same 30-minute program but with a different political commercial (5-minute image, 5-minute issue, 1-minute image, and 1-minute issue). Several different measures of effectiveness were employed. The results indicated that the subjects recalled more of the content of image spots than of issue spots, but that issue spots resulted in higher evaluation of the candidate as measured by a semantic differential. Although this study provides good control of independent variables and used real political spots, the laboratory setting reduces its applicability to actual campaigns.

Finally, in regard to type of commercial, some attention has been given to the difference between color and balck-and-white ads. Donohue (1973) found that color ads resulted in higher quality ratings, particularly for females.

Thus, the research in this area to date has indicated no clear superiority in all aspects for one kind of spot over another. Part of the difficulty in this area lies in the difficulty of defining and clearly separating different types, such as image and issue spots. No attempt has been made so far to expand the interpretation of types to include more specific kinds of films, such as bandwagon spots, confrontation spots, documentary formats, etc.

Length of Spot

Much of the popular concern over political ads has centered on their short length, which many feel inherently produces oversimplification and distortion. Little research, however, directly addresses the question of the relative effect of differing lengths of spots.

Swanson (1973) conducted a limited survey during the 1972 campaign in which voters were asked to recall the content of television spots and of 30-minute programs they had seen. Shorter commercials or spots seemed to be more efficient than longer programs as the retention loss was 50-80% lower for the short commercials.

The survey conducted in 1972 by O'Keefe and Sheinkopf (1974) indicated that longer spots do not do a very good job of informing voters. These findings bear some qualification in view of the curious reasoning process of the researchers. They note that more long (5-minute) commercials than short ones were used in 1972, and since their telephone survey indicated that few voters could recall many issues from the presidential campaign, they make the rather facile assumption that long spots are not very effective.

The laboratory study by Kaid (1975), previously described, compared length as well as type of commercials. In terms of candidate evaluation, the 5-minute spots appeared significantly more effective than the 1-minute spots, but no significant difference between lengths surfaced in terms of the amount of information subjects could recall about spots. On other measures in the study, such as name identification of the candidate and voting intention, the length of the spot interacted with the type of spot (image vs. issue), seemingly indicating that no simple generalization about the impact of length is justified at this time.

Direct Impact on Voter Decision-Making

Despite the great amount of controversy which has surrounded the use of political spots, there have been few studies which have attempted to actually measure the direct impact of ads on voter decision-making. Much of what we have are the rather vague hunches of the professional media consultants. Media pros are usually vociferous in their praises of television ads, but there are few well-documented instances in which success claims for political ads are relatively free from conflicting interpretations.

Perhaps the best of these involves the 1968 Alaska senatorial contest between Gravel and Gruening. Professional campaign consultant Joe Napolitan (1972) asserts that a 30-minute political commercial for Gravel changed Gruening's 2 to 1 lead in the polls into a 55-45 advantage for Gravel, the eventual victor. A poll taken on Saturday showed Gruening leading 2 to 1, the 30-minute Gravel program was shown simultaneously on all stations on Sunday, and the Monday poll gave Gravel the lead. Says Napolitan, "Nothing happened between the Saturday and Monday polls except the simulcast. Never before, or since, to my knowledge, has it been possible to isolate the impact of a single television program so dramatically" (p. 66-67).

Some studies relying on self-reports of influence also indicate great impact. A Foote, Cone, and Belding (1971) study found that 70% of a nationwide sample felt that television ads were at least "somewhat influential" while 37% thought them "highly influential". Such results are not so surprising, however, when one realizes that of the five possible answers from which respondents could select, four indicated a positive response to political ads.

Atkin, et al. (1973) found that of the voters who said they made up their minds after exposure to political ads, the self-reported impact of the ads was substantial. Of these late deciders, 59% said that their chosen candidate's ads were helpful in deciding to vote for him, but only 47% felt that the television ads were the "most" influential factor in their decision.

DeVries and Tarrance (1972), however, found voters much less willing to admit that television ads played a major role in their electoral choices. In this study of ticket splitters and undecided voters in the 1970 Michigan gubernatorial election, subjects were asked to rate on an 11-point scale a large number of potential media influences on their voting decision. TV ads scored only 3.6 on the 11-point scale, as compared to 6.8 for TV editorials. Overall, TV ads ranked 24th out of 35 factors. These three studies, however, only test what people say influences their behavior but provide no verification that this is actually true.

Of the other studies, none is quite so dramatic nor able to tie results so specifically to a particular commercial as Napolitan's Gravel example. Some are inconsistent with the view that television has powerful effects. Lawrence (1972) examined advertising effects in a Congressional campaign. Using a panel interview technique, he found that only 8% of the sample could be classified as converters but that these converters were more exposed to television advertisements than were non-converters. However, converters were also more exposed to television news, confounding any direct-effect hypothesis. Lawrence concludes that while the advertising had some small influence, it was not statistically significant.

Finally, important research by Patterson and McClure (1973) bears discussion. These researchers applied the Fishbein model of belief measurement in a panel survey of the 1972 presidential campaign and specifically analyzed 3 Democrats-for-Nixon commercials. The researchers found that for two of the ads, people changed their beliefs in the direction of the ads over the time period of the study. High television viewers changed more than low television viewers and interestingly, there was more information gain (more change in beliefs in the direction of the ads) for low-interest voters than for high-interest voters. The major problem with the study is its inability to trace the observed effects to the political ads themselves. Although they were able through the panel technique to measure beliefs before and after the particular ads were aired, they could not of course control for exposure to information about the particular issues concerned via other information sources. That there were other intervening factors is strongly suggested by the finding that beliefs changed in the opposite direction for the third commercial analyzed.

Function of Ads for Voters

Recent years have witnessed an upsurge of interest in a functional approach to the study of mass communication--a trend away from the simple "bullet" theory (what does the media do to the receiver) and more toward a "functional" theory (what functions do the media messages perform for the receivers). Some limited application of this approach has reached the study of television advertising as both scholars and practitioners want to know why voters watch ads and what use they make of the information they acquire from doing so.

Atkin, et al. (1973) asked voters in their telephone sample why they watched political spots. One-half of the sample responded that they watched ads because they "can't avoid them," one-third said they watched for "information," and the final one-sixth watched for "information and enjoyment."

Similar questions were asked of campaign workers via a mail questionnaire by Sheinkopf, Atkin, and Bowen (1973) with somewhat different results. Of the campaign workers, 73% said they watched for information or for enjoyment and information, while only 27% did so because they could not avoid them, not a surprising result among such active members of the electorate.

The ads also served an encouragement function for the campaign workers--73% felt that the ads helped keep up their morale and 74% felt that the ads bolstered their confidence in ultimate success at the polls. Some 65% found the ads to be useful information sources, and 74% watched the ads of the opposition as a means of getting "ammunition" with which to sway others. Thus, for party workers at least, the ads serve an important reinforcement and morale-boosting function.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several fruitful avenues of future research can be identified from the foregoing summary. First, further efforts must be made to isolate the impact of particular political spots. Unfortunately, most of the survey research to date has been unable to ascertain if the beliefs and attitudes measured are truly the result of political spots or of other information sources within the campaign environment. This is particularly important because, as other research indicates, voters do not easily separate news from advertising and may not in retrospect recall the exact source of specific information. Researchers cannot continue to rely on the ex post facto recall of voters. Until this primarily methodological problem is solved, there can be little real confidence in such results.

Second, experimental laboratory studies suffer from a different but equally important problem. While such designs can control for other variables in the environment, they place the viewer in unrealistic situations. While a great deal more laboratory research needs to be done to isolate the relative effect of various communication techniques in political communication, care must be taken to create more realistic viewing situations and settings which more closely approximate campaigns. Such studies can be strengthened by the inclusion of real political commercials as stimulus materials, the placement of spots to be tested within the context of normal television viewing, simulation of a campaign environment, and attempts to measure effects over time instead of only immediately following the experiment.

The latter suggestion raises another important point. Both survey and laboratory research need to attempt to measure the importance of repeated exposure to the same or similar messages. Additionally, it would be helpful to measure the cumulative impact of several different commercials over time. Well-designed and thought-out studies can easily make this possible.

Fourth, while it is necessary and important to isolate the impact of specific commercials and their cumulative effect, it should also be helpful to pay considerably more attention to the interaction of commercials with other sources and messages within the campaign environment. For instance, to what extent do voters consciously perceive discrepancies between information from television news and political commercials, and between the commercials of competing candidates? What are the effects of such discrepant perceptions?

Another avenue of neglected research is the absence of careful comparisons of political TV advertising with other forms of campaign advertising, particularly radio and newspapers. It is nothing short of amazing that, despite intuitive feelings, informed speculation, and repeated descriptions of differences between channels of information, almost no empirical research in the political communication field has attempted to explore the comparative impact of the same or similar messages via radio, television, and/or newspapers.

Finally, researchers interested in the impact of political commercials should make more efforts to study the functions which such stimuli perform for voters. Clearly, as new directions in mass communication research are indicating, there is much more to the impact of any communication stimulus than simple direct effects. More attention should be given to determining what uses voters make of the information in political spots, what needs such communication fulfills for them, what other communication-related behaviors may be stimulated by viewing spots, etc.

In conclusion, important contributions have been made, but a great deal is yet undiscovered. The upcoming 1976 elections will provide scholars with ample opportunity at all electoral levels. If past mistakes can be avoided, methodologies improved, new directions pursued, a great many more definitive conclusions about the impact of political television commercials should soon be possible.

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